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SUBJECT: SHIA ASHURA CELEBRATION PASSES PEACEFULLY IN AFGHANISTAN

¶1. (U) On December 27, Afghan Shia throughout the country publicly and peacefully observed the holiday Ashura. Black, red, and green banners draped monuments, street lights, and doors in Kabul more than a week in advance of the holiday to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the prophet Mohammad's grandson. On Ashura itself, thousands of Afghan Shia processed through the streets of Kabul, Herat, and other major cities to publicly mourn Hussein's death. Many participating in the processions engaged in public self-flagellation, while other Shia commemorated the day in quiet, indoor ceremonies.

¶2. (U) Although Ashura is a primarily Shia holiday, a number of Afghan Sunni politicians paid their respects on December 27. President Karzai addressed the congregation at powerful Shia leader Ayatollah Mohseni's mosque in Kabul in a televised speech. According to Waliullah Rahmani, Director of the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies, the speech did not focus on the religious (and thus sectarian) aspects of Ashura, but Karzai used the opportunity instead to call on the Taliban to put down their weapons and join with the Afghan people. Other Sunni political leaders, including current cabinet members and MPs, participated in ceremonies at both Mohseni's and MP Mohaqeq's (Kabul, Hazara) Kabul mosques.

¶3. (SBU) MP Ahmad Ali Jebraili (Herat, Hazara), an Iranian-trained cleric, told us December 29 that the commemoration of Ashura has become a nationally respected event. He praised Afghanistan's "new political system" which grants minorities the "freedom to practice religious rituals in public celebrations." While it is clear that religious tolerance in Afghanistan does not stretch far beyond Islam, the peaceful public celebrations of Ashura signify a growing tolerance among Sunnis for the Shia minority. Rahmani also noted to us that the black Ashura drapery in Kabul extended far beyond the predominantly Shia areas, including into areas associated with Hezb-e Islami. The allegedly Iranian-funded Ashura decorations and celebrations throughout the country are part of an effort to show that while Shias are a minority, they are a powerful one, according to Afghanistan Watch Director (and Hazara Shia) Abdul Jalil Benish.

¶4. (U) For the second year in a row, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health opened blood banks in major cities on Ashura to encourage Shia to donate blood rather than to injure themselves in the street. The head of international relations at the Ministry, told us that they opened donation centers in Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, and Kandahar. Second Vice President Khalili, an Hazara Shia, and Shia cabinet members were among the more than 500 Shias to donate blood in Kabul.

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